

# A Relational-Centred International Education Partnership: A Phenomenological Inquiry Into The Lived Experiences Of Child And Youth Care/Social Care Students And Faculty

Gerard Bellefeuille, MacEwan University, Canada  
Jenny McGrath, MacEwan University, Canada

## ABSTRACT

*This qualitative study examines both the process and effects of a relational-centred international education partnership between MacEwan University in Alberta, Canada, and Ireland's Athlone Institute of Technology. It also seeks to capture the meaning of and the transformative effects of the international education partnership on students and faculty as they evolved through lived experience and emerged into consciousness. Data collection strategies included surveys, personal interviews, reflective journaling, and conversation style-focus groups. Data were analyzed by means of phenomenological hermeneutic analysis. Three main themes emerged that were common to both students and faculty. In addition, a number of group-specific themes emerged.*

**Keywords:** International Education Partnership; Lived Experiences; Phenomenology; Relational-centred

## INTRODUCTION

In higher education, it is generally accepted that because we live in a complex, interconnected, rapidly changing, and diverse global society, a cross-disciplinary and international collaborative approach to education is needed to properly prepare students for success in today's careers (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Desai-Trilokekar, Jones, Shubert, 2009). Fittingly, postsecondary institutions have gradually turned their focus to the international mobility of students and staff, new technologies that connect scholarly communities, and international partnerships.

Recognizing the benefits of this growing trend toward internationalizing higher education, the Bachelor of Child and Youth Care program (BCYC) at MacEwan University (MU) in Edmonton, Alberta, entered into an educational partnership agreement with Ireland's Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) School of Social Care in 2010. The partnership was mutually viewed as a way to enhance the breadth and quality of the teaching, scholarship, and learning experiences of the students and faculty at both institutions.

The partnership's first initiative involved the development of a short-term, study-abroad course. The goal of the study-abroad course is to expose third-year child and youth care (CYC) students in Canada to the Social Care (SC) system in Ireland; the overall objective is to build cultural competency through the exploration of methods of practice and interventions witnessed in a different social, economic, political, and cultural context. Several secondary learning outcomes include:

- the acquisition of professional skills and experiences that a traditional classroom setting simply cannot provide
- exposure to new ways of thinking about practice issues
- expanding relational skills by forging international friendships and professional networks
- increasing students' level of cultural competency and capacity to understand diversity

The course is delivered over a 10-day period. After a day-long flight to Dublin, students are bused to Athlone. They spend the first three days attending class lectures, meeting students, and participating in extracurricular activities and field trips to historic and cultural sites. The following three days are spent in Dublin and the surrounding area visiting with government representatives and community-based organizations that provide care and support to vulnerable children, youth, and families. The final three days are spent in Belfast, which also involves site visitations and takes in cultural and historical events. Seventeen CYC students took part in the first offering of the study-abroad course in February 2011. This was followed by a second offering of the course in February 2012 in which a cohort of 22 CYC and social work students took part.

The second initiative involved a cohort of seven AIT students who traveled to Edmonton, Alberta, to complete a portion of their required practicum hours in selected community-based settings. The placements were selected by the CYC program, but the supervision of the students remained with AIT. As part of the experience, the visiting practicum students were invited to attend a number of classes at MacEwan University as guest students and to participate in cultural events. The experience provided AIT students with new ways of thinking about their practice, opportunities for personal development in a different cultural context, and occasions to meet new people without interrupting their studies.

#### **LOCATED IN RELATIONAL-CENTRED PEDAGOGY**

Relational-centred practice honours the collaborative meaning-making process that is so central to CYC practice. Garfat (2008), for example, describes CYC practice as existing in the “in-between”:

*There is no place else it can be. For without our presence in the in-between, there is no opportunity for a co-created connected experiencing to occur. The co-creation of the in-between between us is central to Relational Child and Youth Care practice...the interpersonal in-between, under the conditions of security, vulnerability, caring, and engagement, becomes what some have called the place of “us” (Mann-Feder, 1999) where “connected experiencing” (Garfat, 1998) occurs, the opportunity for the co-creation of reality (Peterson, 1998) is available, and relational practice (Garfat, 2003a, 2003b) takes on full meaning. In this state we (self and other) are the interpersonal in-between. It is here, in this interpersonally co-created place, that Relational Child and Youth Care practice occurs; and so, it is this that we work towards in our interactions with others. (pp. 8–9)*

Relational-centred practice emphasizes the space between—where meaning emerges—and is predicated upon the assumption that all people are social beings. Relational centred practice, therefore, frames knowledge as something that is socially constructed by people who are in relationship with each other (Bellefeuille & Ricks, 2010). This view represents the flip side of the autonomous, separate, ego-based narrative of self as defined by contemporary Western culture. From the relational-centred practice perspective, knowledge is inherently relational in that it is constructed through relationships that are themselves embedded in a cultural, socio-economic, and socio-political context (Bellefeuille & Ricks, 2010).

The international education partnership incorporated several relational-centred features, including the use of modern communication technologies, such as Facebook and blogging, as part of its strategy to form connections and to build relationships between faculty and students from ATI and MU. The organic evolution of the partnership also highlighted and exemplified the relational in its collaborative and synergetic approach to the design of the partnership agreement.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW: INTERNATIONALIZATION OF EDUCATION IN HIGHER LEARNING**

The internationalization of higher education has become a major objective for colleges and universities as a means to provide graduates with the knowledge, skills, and perspectives required to live, work, and communicate as global professionals and citizens (AUCC, 2007). It has also become an important strategy employed by smaller postsecondary institutions to share knowledge, expertise and skills, and thereby promote capacity building across institutions.

While the concept of internationalization is multi-dimensional and means different things to different people, for Canadian scholar Jane Knight, “the internationalization of higher education is one of the ways a country responds to the impact of globalization yet, at the same time, respects the individuality of the nation” (IMHE 1999, p. 14). The Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) statement on internationalization in 1995 promoted the notion of internationalization as “a necessary, vital, and deliberate transformation of how we teach and learn and it is essential to the future quality of higher education in Canada, indeed to the future of Canada” (Tunny & White, 2008). Further, the Association of International Educators (NAFSA), the world's largest non-profit professional association dedicated to international education, offered the following working definition in 2010:

*Internationalization is the conscious effort to integrate and infuse international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the ethos and outcomes of postsecondary education. To be fully successful, it must involve active and responsible engagement of the academic community in global networks and partnerships. (p. 2)*

A review of the internationalization of education literature of the past decade reveals the following ways that internationalization activities have manifested (Altbach & Knight, 2007; NAFSA, 2010):

- development of new international networks and consortia
- growing emphasis on developing international, intercultural, and/or global dimensions in the curriculum and teaching-learning process
- provision of international learning experiences for faculty and students
- strengthened focus on advancing international research by connecting institutions and scholars with those who have similar strengths and interests
- promotion of the overall mission of the institution
- increased number of academic programs that provide cross-border delivery
- growth in campus-based extracurricular activities that have an international or multicultural component
- greater energy given to recruiting foreign students

Whatever their goals, motivations, and forms, international initiatives promote an increase in student, faculty, and staff awareness of international culture, perspectives, and issues (Harrison & Malone, 2004), strengthen research and knowledge production (Tunny & White, 2008), and foster international cooperation and solidarity. The benefits impact students, faculty, institutions, and society, in general (Tunny & White, 2008).

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to examine both the process and effects of the relational-centred international education partnership established between MacEwan University in Alberta, Canada, and Ireland's Athlone Institute of Technology. It also seeks to capture the meaning and transformative nature of the partnership through the lived experiences of students and faculty as they emerge into consciousness.

## **CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

The design of the study is informed by the theoretical perspective of relational-centred theory (Bellefeuille & Jamieson, 2008; Bellefeuille & Ricks, 2010) and the phenomenological exploration of the *lived experiences* of students and faculty involved in the international study-abroad initiatives (i.e., *life world*) as they are revealed in surveys, personal interviews, conversational style-focus groups, and reflective journaling. This methodological

approach is appropriate and well-suited to drawing out the experiential reality of the life world - not as an object of conversation, but as something that is intensely and personally encountered (van Manen, 2003).

As Merleau-Ponty explains, human subjective experience is the most valid stance from which a person's experience of self and the world can be described and studied (Edwards, 1998; Moran, 2000). This assessment affirms that people learn about themselves by reflecting on their being in the world. As such, experiences and memories are not only something we have, they are also something we are. In other words, there is no "inner self" in the sense of an entirely hidden property separated from other people; rather, the body, as a self, is expressive (Tiemersma, 1989). This assertion is in line with relational-centred theory that rejects the Cartesian maxim, "I think, therefore I am", and replaces it with a more holistic premise that does not presume the primacy of the individual mind - "I feel and relate and therefore I am" (Bellefeuille & Ricks, 2010).

## **SAMPLE**

Data were collected from study-abroad and non-study-abroad students, faculty, key individuals representing the community-based settings, and international administrative personnel from both universities. A non-probability, purposive, maximum variation sampling strategy was used to identify and select study participants from the five participant categories identified above. Maximum variation sampling (sometimes called a maximum diversity sample or a maximum heterogeneity sample) is a form of purposive sampling in which the researcher deliberately selects cases (users) that add contrasting elements to the sample (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). Variation is also a good method for controlling sample bias (Mills & Huberman, 1994) and ensuring saturation of categories (Glasser, 1978).

## **Target Sample Size**

AIT/MU faculty (20)

AIT/MU non-exchange students (60)

AIT/MU exchange students (45)

Community-based resource settings personnel (15)

International administrative personnel (4)

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The proposal for this study was approved by MacEwan University's Human Research Ethics Committee on November 1, 2011.

## **DATA GENERATION**

It is often challenging for participants to articulate their lived experiences. For this reason, a combination of data collection strategies was employed, including surveys, personal interviews, reflective journals, and conversation style-focus groups, in a multifarious approach designed to prompt research participants to reflect critically on their lived experiences of the international education partnership initiatives. Data were collected in four separate phases that began with online surveys; thereafter, the personal interview followed by reflective journaling and concluding with conversational style-focus group discussions.

## **ANALYSIS**

Data were analyzed using van Manen's (2003, p. 79) method of hermeneutical analysis. Analysis triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple data sources, researchers and reviewers, and the use of more than one strategy to analyze the same data set for the purpose of validation. Data analysis involved a thematic analysis of the surveys, personal interviews, and reflective journals followed by a process of thematic reflection conducted collaboratively with participants as a second-level strategy to achieve deeper insights into and understandings of the first level of analysis.

## **RESULTS**

Three main themes emerged that were common to both students and faculty. Additionally, three themes emerged for students and two themes emerged for faculty.

### **COMMON THEMES**

The three common themes that emerged as characteristic of the experiences and life worlds of both faculty and study-abroad and non-study abroad students centred on: 1) a sense of affirmation and engagement resulting in a feeling of renewal, 2) a heightened sense of professional identity connected to greater purpose, and 3) personal benefits, awareness, and growth. These themes were manifestly interwoven throughout the data collection process and were evident in the participants' meaning-making narratives about their overall experiences.

#### **Theme: Renewal**

Participants described how this international experience relationship led them to re-evaluate their chosen profession, particularly because many were starting to feel tired of and disenchanted with their education and their practice experiences. After seeing CYC and SC through a new lens, participants spoke about their renewed energy to make a difference and their commitment to being their best selves as they move forward in their careers.

*This trip was that awakening I needed to give me hope.* – Student Journal Entry

*I felt that my trip to Canada came at a time during my four-year course when my initial enthusiasm was wavering. It really gave me a renewed sense of interest and a renewed energy for study.* – Student Journal Entry

*I feel a renewed sense of pride being part of a community of caring.* – Faculty Journal Entry

#### **Theme: Greater Purpose**

A related theme of *greater purpose* was expressed as a result of an increased awareness of the universal nature of CYC/SC and an expanded view of CYC/SC practice, as observed from an international stage. This was especially evident when describing classroom learning and placement experiences; participants expressed pride in the shared commonalities and strengths of both systems.

*The trip to Ireland and being part of this research project has me feeling more connected to both the program and the wider community of people who care about caring.* – Faculty Journal Entry

*I realized just how much the Irish and Canadians have to offer each other. This broader perspective will enhance the practice of all students who become involved in this experience.* – Student Journal Entry

*This exchange can add so much to a student's academic career. I felt that the whole experience enhanced my ability to be culturally competent in my practice as I was able to study and get practical experience in a completely different society.* – Student Journal Entry

#### **Theme: Personal Growth**

From the onset, the focus of these initiatives has always been to include students in the planning, discussion, and evolution the project. At first, a buddy system was established through a Facebook site to help students make links, ask questions, and prepare for their journey. Since that time, students from both institutions have organized events for visiting students, mentored new students, and contributed to this research. The Facebook page now has over 50 participants and is still growing. All phases of the research revealed that these supportive relationships were key contributors to personal growth.

*I adapted into another countries [sic.] living and working environments as [a] result of help from other students and self-motivation. I have grown more independent... and confident by doing and acting on things. – Student Journal Entry*

*I have gotten to know my colleagues and our students better and it is wonderful to see them in action in new and different ways. I have grown in my appreciation for the strengths and diversity of skills they bring to the table, which is not only inspiring but also encourages me to reflect on what I am good at and have to contribute to the profession and in my teaching as well. – Faculty Journal Entry*

*Going to Ireland was powerful. I think travel - learning and having to adapt to a new culture and new customs - really pushed me out of my comfort zone. I was also able to connect with peers in a way that I had not done back home and really found a renewed interest in the field. – Student Journal Entry*

### **SPECIFIC STUDENT THEMES**

While there were commonalities among the experiences of students and faculty, several sub-themes emerged that were specific to each group. Themes exclusive to the student group include 1) making the connection between culture, politics, policy, and practice; 2) living “it”; 3) scope and depth of practice; and 4) seeing the positive aspects of culture.

#### **Theme: Making The Connection Between Culture, Politics, Policy, And Practice**

The discipline of child and youth care operates within an ecological system’s perspective. Simply put, ecological systems theory describes levels of the environment (i.e., microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem) that influence children and family development. It was therefore especially interesting to see in the data the connections that study-abroad students were identifying regarding the interrelatedness of culture, politics, policy, and practice. These were connections students had not necessarily made in their home country.

*This experience, to me, was more than just learning about social care in Ireland. I was able to increase my knowledge of the world, the troubles, the culture, and the people. I went to Ireland knowing very little about Irish history, but this trip taught me more than I could have imagined. Better than all of those things, through the journaling process I really learned a lot about myself, my values, my morals, and what I care about in the world. This trip opened my eyes to the world. I came back feeling like I could no longer ignore the news about the world because I finally became a participant in the world. I could not imagine my life today if I had not taken the exchange. – Student Journal Entry*

*Sometimes we are used to a particular ethnic minority within our culture and, as a result, we can often overlook the need for being aware of the differences and how we should adjust our practice accordingly. In Canada, this could be the Aboriginal people and, in Ireland, the travelling community. I know that for myself, working with aboriginal youth in my Canadian placement made me reflect more on attitudes in Ireland about our traveller communities and how they form part of our cultural landscape. I got a greater sense of the potential society has to learn from these cultures if we remain open and non-judgemental. I would consider this a very positive aspect of the exchange for me. – Student Journal Entry*

#### **Theme: Living “It”**

Students reported that the study-abroad experience helped them recognize the authentic nature of CYC practice. This was witnessed in the classroom, on agency visits, and in placements with instructors, fellow students, and front line practitioners. Although difference was evident, at their core, people involved in CYC/SC want to help make a difference in the lives of children, youth, families, and communities. This awareness helped students recognize that they will be most effective as practitioners when they utilize their authentic selves in this work.

*It gave me a way to experience the practice in a living, connection[-]making, experience[-]driven way. It helped me widen my idea of what the field is and helped remove some of the limitations that were set about the field as well. I*



*loved getting to see that passionate people are being innovative and creative and[,] around the world, that there is so much opportunity for partnership and information exchange out there. It has made the field wider for me and as well...gave me more imagination around my own future in CYC. – Student Journal Entry*

*The fact that I have invested in travelling specifically for the purpose of broadening my knowledge and perspective as a social care practitioner has enhanced my professional identity and gained respect from others in the field. – Student Journal Entry*

*Through the exchange, authenticity was achievable and inevitable because I find that when I step out of my normal social roles, such as mother, wife, daughter, etc., I reconnect to me as an individual. I love these social roles, but I am a better person for rediscovering me when I travel. – Student Journal Entry*

### **Theme: Scope And Depth Of Practice**

Students commented that this international partnership helped them expand their professional identity and opened the door for new possibilities in their work. Many students expressed interest in integrating their observations and new learning into their current practice; they also celebrated the endless possibilities for affecting the global world of CYC/SC as a result of their new experiences.

*I think that travel in general always changes one's identity in some way. Travel allows a person to see the world in a different way. This experience allowed me to see the Child and Youth Care field through another lens and, in doing so, strengthened my professional identity. – Student Journal Entry*

*Even though there are many different opportunities and influential things you can do with this degree, it was not until I went to Ireland and saw how globally we can impact children, youth and families that I truly felt that I had chosen a profession that was meaningful to me. – Student Journal Entry*

### **Theme: Seeing the Positive Aspects of Culture**

When travelling, a person often sees a culture solely through a tourist lens. One of the highlights of this partnership is that students are able to immerse themselves in another culture, if only for a short time. The relationships developed in both Ireland and Canada have enabled participants to visit homes, schools, and agencies and discover history, culture, and community with local peoples. Many students talked about how this learning changed how they view the world and their practice.

*I learned so much about their culture and the importance of preserving culture for people. – Student Journal Entry*

*This cultural experience has supported and enhanced my education. – Student Journal Entry*

*These agency visits have really stood out for me and have gotten me to look deeper within our systems here in Canada. – Student Journal Entry*

*You could literally feel the history as you walked down the streets anywhere in Ireland. There were so many times that I was just speechless, taking in everything the Irish have survived. Hearing the stories of the troubles really made me re-define what I thought about human resiliency. – Student Journal Entry*

### **SPECIFIC FACULTY THEMES**

Themes specific to faculty included personal empowerment and potential for collaboration.

### **Theme: Personal Empowerment**

One of the primary reasons faculty pursue international education partnerships is to grasp the opportunity to engage with others and share ideas. Many faculty spoke about feeling empowered in their profession. Empowerment

is the process through which teachers become capable of engaging in, sharing control of, and influencing the events and institutions that affect their lives. The faculty at MU and AIT continue to dialogue about ways to enhance and improve this partnership; their ideas include faculty exchanges, sharing resource collaboration, and joint scholarship. Faculty from both institutions have experienced new opportunities for professional development that enhanced teaching and learning opportunities for all involved.

*The partnership has been really empowering for me. It has provided a context for stimulating cross-cultural conversations about how we teach and how we think about education.* – Faculty

*It has also made me realize that I've been in a self-imposed academic rut. There is so much positive energy associated with meeting students and faculty from abroad.* – Faculty

### **Theme: Collaboration**

*Faculty are looking more at international Faculty development opportunities and studies - conferences, research and exchanges. The exchange has made the idea of future exchanges more "real". We are thinking on a larger scale.* – Faculty

*I think it was a terrific opportunity to really walk the walk of the program values that I try to live every day and model those values in problem-solving as various issues cropped up. I delighted in seeing the students support and help each other as they were challenged to integrate the professional and personal aspects of the journey as well.* – Faculty

### **SPECIFIC COMMUNITY SETTING THEME**

Agency involvement and support has been an integral component of this process because it is within agency contexts that students have witnessed the diversity of CYC and SC in the two countries. Students have been challenged to reconsider old paradigms and integrate new ideas into their identity. The main theme that resonated for personnel within all agencies involved was that supporting a student also resulted in much learning and growth for the agency. The staff, children, and youth were able to experience and learn about a new culture through interactions with students.

### **Theme: Mutually Beneficial**

*The reciprocal relationship was hugely beneficial. The payoff was well worth the effort as our student contributed much to our organization* – Placement agency staff member comment. – Community-based Resource Settings Personnel

*I would welcome the opportunity to have another international student* – Placement agency staff member comment. – Community-based Resource Settings Personnel

*We learned from one another about diversity and our student was able to experience more than the touristy version of our city.* – Community-based Resource Settings Personnel

### **SPECIFIC INTERNATIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE PERSONNEL THEME**

Administrative personnel from both MU and AIR were involved in helping this partnership come to fruition. They helped map out the MOU process and offered support as required. Data from the administrative personnel participants yielded one central theme - creativity/innovativeness.

### **Theme: Creativity/Innovativeness**

*I hope that this project has shown other faculties that it is possible to collaborate with international institutions in more creative and shorter-term ways. I believe it has shown programs in HCS [Health and Community Studies] that such collaboration is positive.*



*This exchange activity serves as a good model for developing other institutional partnerships. The enthusiasm from students, faculty, and staff should "inspire" other programs to explore similar opportunities for their students.*

## CONCLUSION

Phenomenological inquiry is a descriptive method of interpretive understanding that seeks to explore the direct experiences of human beings as meaning-making agents in their life worlds (van Manen, 2003). From a relational-centred child and youth care perspective, the construction of meaning is central to life in that it enables human beings to make sense of their experiences. However, meaning-making requires a degree of intuitive integration of experience into consciousness at the individual level and as an element of shared meaning. This study presented an opportunity to 1) examine the process and the effects of the relational-centred international education partnership between MacEwan University and Athlone Institute of Technology and 2) to explore the effects of the study-abroad initiative on students, faculty, community sites, and international administrative personnel through a phenomenological guided exploration of lived experiences.

The most important finding of this study was the identification of the transformative nature of the international education partnership for students and faculty. This became evident in the themes that emerged from the personal narratives provided by the study's participants. This study suggests that the relational aspect of international education partnerships, over and above the cross-cultural learning context, is the most significant factor in promoting positive learning outcomes that are also deeply transformative experiences. The phenomenological method used here offers a window onto the participants' lived emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, and even spiritual experiences. It is our hope that these insights can be utilized by others who seek to develop their own international education partnerships.

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

**Dr. Gerard Bellefeuille** held the position of Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of Northern British Columbia before joining the Bachelor of Child and Youth Care program at Grant MacEwan University in 2006. Gerard has spent over 28 years working in the human services field as a front line practitioner, the executive director of non-profit agencies, Provincial Director of Community Development, and organizational consultant. Gerard is the recipient of many research awards. In addition, he has co-authored three books and has delivered keynote addresses and academic papers around the world on a variety of human service issues. E-mail: [bellefeuilleg@macewan.ca](mailto:bellefeuilleg@macewan.ca) (Corresponding author)

**Jenny McGrath, MS**, is a full-time instructor in the Bachelor of Child and Youth Care program at MacEwan University in Edmonton, Alberta. She has been in the field for over 16 years and has worked in a variety of child and youth care positions in hospitals, community, residential, and families. Jenny has presented on a variety of topics, including group work, family support, and relational practice at numerous child and youth care conferences across Canada and internationally.

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